

THE BURMA ROAD

A Book Proposal

Wendy Law-Yone

C O N T E N T S

- BOOK PROPOSAL
- A BRIEF HISTORY
- PROCEDURE
- A CHINESE JOURNEY
- PHOTOGRAPHS

THE BURMA ROAD

Book Proposal

Using the Burma Road and its colorful history as a backdrop, I intend a book of some 350-400 pages, with photographs, which surveys the Burma road in another, wider context. I mean the road taken by Burma since its independence from a century of colonialism—and the path of one family's history along the Burma road (in both the historic and metaphoric sense). The family would be my own.

The story of The Burma Road is in large measure the story of the unique route followed over the past half century by one of the more obscure and perplexing countries in the world. Once a kingdom of opulent and often bellicose dynasties, Burma was fully annexed by the British in 1886, who ruled until independence in 1948. After a brief thirteen-year experiment in democracy, the post-independence government was overpowered by a military dictatorship, whose thirty-three year reign has since transformed the country from a once prized colony of great vitality and promise into an impoverished, backward and neglected nation.

How this transformation took place—what happened after the British left and independence came—is a story with elements at once common to all modern nations from Asia to Africa who share in the legacy of colonialism, yet peculiar to Burma alone.

In one of literature's more eloquent indictments of imperialism, George Orwell described in his classic essay the ordeal of a colonial official required to shoot an elephant for a show of political purpose, of moral authority, in front of a native crowd in Burma. What has happened to Burma since the shooting of the elephant is a question to which few outsiders have the answer. Although no legacy of imperialism is entirely benign, in Burma's case the inheritors seemed in the aftermath able to retain an unusual sense of balance and perspective about the colonial heritage. One observer traveling through the country in the fifties spoke of how the Burmese "freed itself from Western domination with the ease of removing an unwanted garment." This tolerance and balance—so lacking in other cultures subjected

to imperialism—was only one of the many promising trends evident in the years immediately following independence.

The popular image then—held by visitors and residents alike—was of an idyll, a golden land blessed by conditions, both economic and psychological, of peculiar solidity. It was a marvelously fertile, potentially self-sufficient country that had within its means the very real possibility of bringing down to the peasant level a better quality of life than that enjoyed by most other nations, developed or otherwise.

Yet in the four decades since, Burma has come under a military dictatorship that rules by decree, forcing through ruinous economic measures while crushing all opposition, jailing and torturing scores of dissidents or suspected dissidents, forcing thousands into refugee camps in neighboring countries, and thousands more into permanent exile.

How a nation can turn within a single generation from utopia to dystopia is a question that continues to puzzle not just the immediate victims of the country's misfortunes but students of politics and social change as well. It is a question of particular interest to me, since this sad decline has coincided with my own lifetime.

Burma gained independence in 1948, a year after I was born. When I was growing up in Rangoon, I was ever aware of a background static of political turmoil, insecurity and chaos. Along with the usual childhood stories of ghosts and bogey men, I was exposed to constant rumors of assassinations, insurgencies, robberies and other routine bids for political and social power. This unusual exposure to news and hearsay I owed to my father's position as editor and publisher of the Rangoon *Nation*, the leading English language daily and in many respects the most influential periodical of the day. It was from the vantage point of a green leather couch in his office, where I was privileged to spend many nights as a young girl, that I observed the parade of characters—politicians, civil servants, monks, revolutionaries, students, intellectuals, entrepreneurs, ambassadors, foreign dignitaries, and religious leaders—who came before my father's desk bearing an assortment of news and views, both parochial and global.

It was a time of contradictions not only in politics but in culture and identity as well. Foreign influences were legion as students went abroad to study, then brought home foreign spouses, languages, dress, fashions, music,

and dances. These often conflicting cross-currents produced a confusion of tastes and ideals, but made for great variety and color.

With the military coup of 1962, however, came profound social, political, and cultural change. Foreign influences were considered unpatriotic and subversive, and "foreigners" who had lived in Burma for generations humiliated and expelled. All foreign businesses, like all private enterprise, were nationalized; all foreign and private property seized. The Burmese Way to Socialism, the military junta's manifesto, espoused the tastes if not the ideals of proletarian correctness.

For the citizens of Burma, almost overnight the villains changed. Whereas previously the threat to peace and security had been posed by rebels and insurgents opposing the government, the threat now came from the government itself. Whereas the military once had been the patriots, the protectors and peace keepers, now they were the bullies, the spies and enforcers—thus creating a climate of mutual suspicion and fear.

In 1967, at a low dip in this cycle of history, when my father was still in jail among thousands of other political prisoners held without charges or trial, I left Burma as an exile. Since then, I have written in novels and articles about the experience of political tyranny and the consequences of exile. My first novel, *The Coffin Tree*, describes the effect of these exigencies on one family. In my most recent novel, *Irrawaddy Tango*, I trace the marks left by political upheaval and tyranny on a protagonist whose fate parallels that of her country. In *The Fear of the Pigeon*, a story in the recently published anthology of travel writing, *Without a Guide*, I recount the difficulties of trying to escape from a police state. In *Life in the Hills* (*The Atlantic*, December 1989), I reported, from rebel camps along the Thai-Burmese border, the exodus of dissident Burmese refugees fleeing the repressive regime by the thousands.

However, I have yet to incorporate all the above themes into a single story. The book I envision would attempt to do so, illuminating the spots along the Burma road where one family's journey and one country's destiny intersect. The Burma Road itself would introduce curiosities—social, scenic and historic—peculiar to the immediate region and the country as a whole (rice farming, slash-and-burn agriculture, teak plantations, the logging industry, elephant lore and mule apocrypha, missionary business, the

colonial conquest, opium cultivation and heroin refinery, jade and tin mining, tribal customs and superstitions, to name the most obvious).

A brief family history is worth recounting at this point. My father, E.M. Law-Yone, was born in the Kachin state in Burma's far north, to the son of an immigrant from Yunnan province. My Chinese grandfather had tried his hand without much success at jade mining, later became an interpreter for the local British magistrate, and was just settling down with a Burmese wife (my grandmother) when a Kachin uprising forced the family down the Mogaung river in a canoe. My grandmother, still in her teens when my father was born, was the niece of the Honorable U Po Saw, a staunch defender of the Burmese monarchy who continued his guerrilla tactics to uphold the dynasty long after the King had abdicated.

In Myitkyina, where Merrill's Marauders were to leave their mark many years later, my grandfather worked as a contractor and the family prospered. Later, he ran the "Royal Mail" service to the remoter outposts of the British Empire, while living in great style—with liveried servants and an unending stream of house guests—in a tin-roofed dung-and-timber house overlooking the Irrawaddy river. When the British began rationing forts along the Chinese frontier, he became a mule supplier, at times providing 1,000 mules in a single delivery.

While my grandmother was uncommonly well read in Burmese history and the Buddhist scriptures, and fluent in several languages as well, my father, the oldest child, was forbidden from speaking Chinese. He was sent to the local Buddhist monastery—part of a superior educational system then prevalent in Burma and largely responsible for the country's high literacy rate. My father's life at the monastery ended at age seven when he fell from the top of a pagoda. This led to his being shipped off to another religious institution—a Catholic boarding school called St. Peter's in Mandalay. Here two things of lasting importance happened: he learned English the hard way, "with light skinned boys jeering at every mistake I made," which led to an abiding passion for the English language; and he converted to Catholicism. By graduation in the winter of 1927, he took first prize for English and Religious Knowledge, with honors in Burmese and Geography.

His father had intended for him to continue his education at the Inns of Court in London, but this career was not to be.

Grandfather's eccentricities had led him down increasingly disastrous paths. He set off on expeditions to Burma's far north on quixotic slave-releasing expeditions, bringing home shrunken heads and ceremonial spears from the head-hunting regions—and new dialects and trinkets from other exotic provinces. Meanwhile, down went his capital and the proceeds from his pawnshop, liquor and opium licenses. Dressed in fashionable Edwardian tweeds, he delighted in giving extravagant gifts like the hand-engraved rifle for his son.

The crash came when Grandfather entered into a scheme with a Burmese con-man who claimed to have mastered the art of duplicating currency notes and persuaded Grandfather to invest his fortune in acquiring the right kind of paper. When the hustler vanished with his money, Grandfather was said to have registered dismay with only one Peking-opera like scream—then pulled himself together to buy a derelict jade mine, which promptly flooded and killed several miners.

Springing back from this setback, he turned his talents to the art of valuation, "pulling fingers" under a handkerchief for a living (open bargaining, which would have affected the market value, was prohibited, thus creating the system of undercover evaluation). By the time my grandfather died, the family fortune amounted to a paltry sum, obliging my father to enter government service as a common clerk detailed to accompany the Deputy Commissioner on tour. In those days, part of Myitkyina was under the civil administration governed by the Indian Penal Code, but vast tracts were still under tribal or customary law. In the course of assisting the Deputy Commissioner with the dispensing of justice and the collection of tribute, my father became an avid reader of Codes and Manuals, studying them late into the nights. This early taste of the law may have given him the confidence, many years later, as a prominent editor and publisher, to defend himself in court against a libel suit. Far from having a fool for a client, he won the case hands down.

It was during his stint as a law clerk in Upper Burma that my father was engaged to my mother, whom he had known since childhood. My mother Eleanor Percy-Smith's family came of quite different stock. In my father's words, "Eleanor, like myself, is a hybrid but of another kind. Her father, Eric Percy-Smith, product of an English public school and Sandhurst,

had come out to India and the northwest Frontier. First with 19 Fane's Horse and later with the Seventeenth Jat Lancers, he was the best polo player of his time. My one and only glimpse of him was in my High School year when Edward VIII as Prince of Wales came to Mandalay and we stood in the burning sun to see Lt. Colonel Percy-Smith (then Deputy Inspector-General of the Burma Military Police) in action. Probably as a result of that encounter Percy-Smith was to referee at Hurlingham and to retrieve the reputation he had lost when during the first World War, after he had won a mention in Dispatches in Mesopotamia, he had raced Army ponies in Baghdad. While in Burma, he had married the Burmese daughter of a schoolmaster and Eleanor and two boys were born. The Colonel put the daughter in St. Joseph's Convent in Mandalay, and went off to catch the bongo, which he sold to the New York zoo, and to start a game sanctuary in Kenya. He died in Marseilles in the autumn of 1937 and the obituary in the London Times concluded with the prayer, 'Peace be to his soul, if such a restless spirit can find peace.'

After their wedding in 1933, my father volunteered for service at the Chinese frontier, at Fort Harrison—until my mother became pregnant with their first child, when they transferred south back to Myitkyina. A year later, after the birth of my eldest brother, my father joined the Burma Railways as a commercial inspector. It was in this capacity as the senior Burmese executive in the Railways that he traveled to Kunming, to study the problem of transporting the huge volume of Lend Lease materiel via Lashio along the Burma Road. In 1937, as the construction of the Burma Road began in China, he left Kunming to take the new road to the border. On the way, he detoured to Tengyueh (now Tengchong), where my grandfather was born, to rediscover his father's home. There he met himself enshrined in a hero-sized photograph.

The details of my father's exploits during the war years, first with the British Army, later with Detachment 101 of the OSS (the Office of Strategic Service) are set out in the spellbinding narrative of his as yet unpublished autobiography. It is a chapter rivaled only by the subsequent story of his career as a journalist and publisher in the post-independence era of the fifties. During his tenure as editor of *The Nation*, he met and talked privately with the more prominent political figures of the day: Brezhnev,

Kosygin, Mikoyan, Chou En-lai, Nehru, Sukarno, Ngo Dinh Diem, Sihanouk, Ben Gurion, Golda Meir, and Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy among them. As one of the winners of the 1959 Ramon Magsaysay Award—along with the Dalai Lama—he was cited for being “an outstanding defender of freedom of the press and of civil rights.” Under his exacting leadership, *The Nation* became a forceful voice widely credited with keeping the democratic process alive in Burma for some fifteen years, and perhaps more extensively quoted in the world press of the day than any other paper in the Far East. His editorials were witty, biting, and thoroughly opinionated. On the eve of a visit to Burma by the Soviet Premier, he began an editorial with these opening lines: “Lock up the girls and hide the silver. Krushchev is coming to town.”

He was arrested by the military regime in 1962, and spent five years as a political prisoner (one and a half in solitary confinement), before being allowed to leave Burma in 1968. For the next two years, he lived in Bangkok, where he collaborated with former Prime Minister U Nu to organize a government-in-exile dedicated to overthrowing the military regime. When he had depleted the last of his once abundant funds and it became clear that the counter-revolution was not destined to succeed, he moved to the United States. First in North Carolina, then in Maryland, he lived an impoverished but spirited life reading, writing, lecturing and fishing until his death in 1980.

My mother, age 82, still lives in Washington DC.

THE BURMA ROAD

A Brief History

The Burma Road, one of the great historic and scenic highways of this century, extends for some 717 tortuous miles from Burma's Shan State to China's Yunnan Province. Like other routes of lasting impact and renown—the old Silk and Ambassador Roads, the Pan American Highway, the Ho Chi Minh Trail—the significance of the Burma Road is both strategic and romantic, evoking traditions of trade, conquest, exploration, adventure, ideology, religion, and endurance.

Hewn from the sides of rock and dense jungled mountains as high as 8,500 feet, the road cuts across China's southwest and down into the northeast of Burma in a series of breathtaking hairpin curves and corkscrew turns.

The Burma Road of World War II fame is a combination of two roads, one built by the British in Burma, the other by the Chinese in Yunnan Province. The Chinese portion of the road, locally known as the Yunnan-Burma Highway, was begun in the early nineteen thirties but completed after the Japanese invasion of China in 1937. From Kunming, the capital of Yunnan, the road wound its serpentine way for 681 miles through high mountain passes and over two mighty rivers (the 2,800-mile-long Mekong and the 800-mile Salween), to the village of Wanding on the Burmese border. There the highway joined an older Burma Road, built by the British in the early part of the century, which continued south from the border for another 116 miles to the railhead in Lashio. With China's ports closed on her eastern seaboard, this continuous highway served as a backdoor land-supply route that allowed China's allies to ship materiel by sea to the port of Rangoon, then by train to the railhead at Lashio, finally by truck to the interior of China.

When the Japanese overran Burma in 1942, effectively closing the Burma end of the road to war supplies, the allied forces trapped north of Lashio fled into China, some over the Yunnan-Burma Road, by then partially destroyed and reduced to an all-weather track, some over an old caravan route to the north. Up along the Yunnan-Burma Road the Japanese had

reached the Salween River and might have advanced further had the Chinese Army not blown up the Salween River bridge and destroyed the road for a good 25 kilometer stretch west of the bridge to tank-proof it against the enemy.

In July 1943, as the Allies readied their counter-offensive in Burma, an engineering corps of 30,000 Chinese and 50 Americans joined to improve or reconstruct the road from Kunming to Lungling across the Salween River.

Meanwhile, since an early recapture of the Burma end of the Road was unlikely, the Allies had decided to build a new artery with a view to driving the Japanese below the projected route through north Burma, and holding them off until the planned allied attack. This new arm of the Burma Road would provide the needed "elbow room" and an alternative to the expensive and hazardous air route over the Himalayas (called the Hump) which, until then, had been the sole means of transporting supplies to Chinese and U.S. forces in China.

As allied forces advanced from Assam in eastern India to northern Burma, the Chinese Expeditionary Force led by General Stilwell thus began construction on the Ledo road, a supply route and oil pipeline connecting the terminus of the Assam railway in India with the Burma Road at a point then still in Chinese hands.

The first convoy of allied supplies moved along the full length of the Ledo (or Stilwell) Road into China in January 1945. From then on, until the Japanese surrender, most of the war supplies sent to China were routed along this wider, better graded, and more traffic-worthy road.

As harrowing as the building of the Ledo Road was, however ("an immense, laborious task," in Churchill's words, carried out in a region largely in enemy hands and costing by some estimates "a man a mile,") it was done with the aid of machinery. The Burma Road in Yunnan, by contrast, had been achieved, in an epic of road building, almost exclusively by hand.

The labor force included some 200 engineers and 160,000 men, women, and children. Mostly conscripted—like the other massive labor force, the Chinese Army—they worked under pitiless conditions to chip away at hundreds of thousands of tons of rock using only primitive chisels, picks and hammers, and to remove at least an equal amount of earth using only small wicker baskets.

The workers consisted of entire families who often traveled 100 miles from home to work on the road under the harshest of conditions. Mobilizing the force were local headmen responsible for filling a labor quota each month. With a minimum of food, shelter and equipment, these laborers hacked and dug away through jungle, mud and rock, over sheer precipices, and through the steepest of gorges, dying along the way from disease, landslides, drownings and other hazards.

The building of the suspension bridges alone required the sacrifice of scores of "suicide" swimmers attempting to ferry the first cable across the river. Accidents were routine and landslides frequent. Rescue missions following landslides were dangerous, laborious and largely futile, with the villagers working much the same as usual to chip away at the earth with mattocks, then to remove the dirt in wicker baskets, in the aprons of dresses, or by the bare handful—the only difference being the added urgency of trying to unearth human beings buried alive under the avalanches.

In the words of the head of the Yunnan-Burma Highway Administration, "by this work of many hands mountains were moved a few cubic inches at a time."

As painstakingly as this work had been done, portions of it had to be as painstakingly redone again and again—and sometimes *undone* (as when the Japanese reached the Salween river in 1942, necessitating the destruction of the bridge and a 25 kilometer section of the road by the Chinese army). The bridges of the Burma Road—in themselves a separate subject of heroic effort—were under siege as early as 1940 when the Japanese bombed the Mekong bridges alone fourteen times in a four-month period. The Chinese engineers, however, had prepared for the possibility that every raid might demolish a bridge entirely and thus entail instant rebuilding.

To assemble a new bridge in a rush would have been nearly impossible given the problem of differing dialects spoken by the assorted crews. Since technical terms were not standardized in China, it would have taken hours to explain the various components of bridge repair. Anticipating this hindrance, the engineers had not only built auxiliary suspensions bridges; they had also stockpiled, in hidden mountain depots, spare parts to build complete duplicate bridges. Finally, they had marked every part with

a number keyed to a master blueprint so that any worker could tell in an instant where and how it would fit.

No sooner had a bomb struck a bridge than the repair crew—engineers, foremen, workmen, mobile repair units and mobile kitchens to provide meals—would go to work, sometimes even as the bombs were still falling. So efficient and swift was the team work that once, when the Japanese blew apart the crucial Salween Bridge, apparently beyond repair, the crews were able to rebuild it in a mere 36 hours.

This wartime effort of constant rebuilding might be seen as symbolic, a mark of certain land routes whose destiny is to be recreated again and again. The Burma Road appears to be one of these enduring highways consisting of a succession of layered routes—a thoroughfare over an old road that once was a footpath which in turn followed an animal track—all taking an astonishingly faithful route over the centuries in the same general direction.

The origins of the Burma Road can be traced to the early days of China's southward expansion in the Western Han period 2,000 years ago. Connecting the many regions into one Chinese nation, then connecting the nation with the rest of the world, were two major roads: the north-south Ambassador's or Tribute Road (so called because in those early days of insularity, most foreigners traveling to China were ambassadors or high-level representatives of other kingdoms); and the east-west Burma Road, which connected China to Burma and other parts of Southeast Asia.

The route pioneered in those days (which the existing Burma Road in some considerable measure either overlaps or closely parallels) began in Chang'an, wended its way south through the steep Qin Ling Mountains, crossed the Yangtze, Mekong, and Salween rivers, connected with the Irrawaddy River in Burma, then followed the Irrawaddy's east bank down to the Bay of Bengal. A separate land connection with India and a sea connection with the Bay of Bengal made this stretch an important link in the network of Spice Routes as well—although it was the Ambassador's Road that was the main conduit for the spice trade.

At the end of the 7th century, following trouble with the Burmese, the Chinese retreated north and closed the southern part of the Burma Road, which then stayed closed for centuries.

With the Mongol conquest in the early 13th Century, China's rule spread farther into the southwest than ever before, effectively reopening the Burma Road as far as the Irrawaddy River. As adviser to Kublai Khan, Marco Polo traveled in the region on his way back to Venice from Cathay, "through very inaccessible places and through vast jungles teeming with elephants, unicorns, and other wild beasts" before reaching a great city on the Irrawaddy.

Following the overthrow of the Mongols by the Ming in the 14th century, China once more withdrew from contact with other nations, bringing in yet another period of isolation. As the empire's road system fell into disrepair, the Burma Road too was closed while that region in the southwest reasserted its independence.

In the centuries following the expansion of European and British trade in Asia, when the sea routes dominated, the old Ambassador's Road and the Burma Road lost their former importance, and by the time of the Opium Wars of the 1830s and 1840s, they were overrun by a plethora of new paths cut alongside the original routes.

Trade between Burma and China had been conducted along the Burma Road and other caravan routes for centuries, Burmese cotton being bartered for Chinese silk and copper. But it was only after the British annexed Burma in the 19th century that the cross-border economy was boosted.

In 1826, fourteen million pounds of Burmese cotton worth £ 228,000 were exported to China, supplemented by quantities of jade, amber, rubies, sapphires, edible birds' nests, and British woolen goods. Chinese exports included copper, ironware, brass, tin, lead, gold leaf, medicines and luxury foods and clothing. The treaty of 1894, which regulated Sino-British trade relations via Burma, did not bring the expected upsurge in the trans-Burma trade. However, with the development of upper Burma, the British extended the Rangoon-Mandalay railway line north to Lashio, which became its north-west terminus and, in 1910, an all-weather motor-road from Lashio to Namkham on the Sino-Burmese frontier.

Following World War II, the Burma Road (as defined by its recent military function: i.e., the highway extending from Kunming to Lashio) once

more lost its former importance on both sides of the border. China entered its period of Communist rule; and the central administration, concerned to subdue the traditionally unruly Yunnan province, began to drive the opium warlords across the Border into Burma. Integrating Yunnan into the rest of China was never easy, due in large part to its mixed population of 24 different minorities which make up a third of its 43 million people. Many of these, along with the majority Yunnanese, also happen to live on the Burmese side of the frontier, creating a cultural ebb and flow.

Burma meanwhile was caught in its own protracted civil war, much of it waged in regions through which the road passed. Conditions on the road steadily deteriorated from the early 1960s on, when a change in Burma's central government to a military dictatorship isolated the country and all but destroyed the infrastructure—including most of its roads.

Phoenix-like, however, the Burma Road today once more is up from the ashes. Not only is the entire stretch—from Lashio to Kunming—operable; since 1988, when a cross-border trade agreement was signed between Burma and China, the road has become increasingly viable as a trade and travel route with important national, bilateral-lateral, and international ramifications.

In recent years, China has exercised a major policy shift with regard to Burma. Between 1968-1978, China provided heavy moral and military support for one of Burma's insurgent groups, the multi-ethnic Communist Party of Burma, whose army controlled much of the Burma Road territory. In 1989, however, internal dissent led to the disintegration of the CPB, scattering its former leaders to China, and the rank and file members back to their respective ethnic armies.

This event roughly coincided with a much larger upheaval that shook the country as massive anti-government demonstrations threatened to topple the central military regime. The uprising was soon ruthlessly crushed by the military (foreshadowing by some four months the showdown at Tien An Men Square). But with the exodus of thousands of Burmese dissidents (mostly students) who fled to the border areas in the wake of the crackdown, the central government faced a threatening new situation in which urban dissidents and ethnic armies were thrown together for the first time and presented the danger of making common cause against the military regime.

time and presented the danger of making common cause against the military regime.

Partly in response to this threat, but possibly also because of the increasing drain on the country's resources exacted by the long civil war, the Burmese government in recent years has sought, through bribery or coercion, to strike separate cease-fire deals with the various armed groups, with the result that most of the ethnic groups formerly engaged in anti-government insurgencies have seen fit to lay down their arms for the time being.

Among the neutralized groups are members of the former CPB, who reportedly have been given license by the military to conduct business as usual—which presumably includes continuing to traffick in opium—so long as they refrain from joining any insurgent groups.

With the disintegration of the Burmese Communists, China has changed its beneficiary to the military government, selling aircraft, tanks and patrol ships worth more than US \$ 1 billion through favorable long-term loans. Much of this infusion arrives by way of the Burma Road—along with a steady stream of consumer goods in heavy demand throughout Burmese towns.

Trucks plying the Road in the other direction carry premium Burmese commodities that include new automobiles channeled through Rangoon's black-market to escape duty in China; vast shipments of timber extracted from Burma's ever-thinning teak forests; and of course opium.

Eighty percent of New York's illegal narcotics market is allegedly of Southeast Asian origin. Of that amount, more than two-thirds is said to be harvested in the Burmese sector of the Golden Triangle. Most of the refineries operate in Kokang, the poppy-growing state adjacent to Yunnan, putting this abundance closer to a potentially vast market—China—en route to the international trade.

With the region's fastest growing heroin center located in Burma just this side of the frontier, the Road has become one of the main conduits for siphoning narcotics out of the notorious Golden Triangle. A 1993 U.S. State Department study concluded that while Thailand had been the main door through which most of the Golden Triangle opium was finding its way to the international markets, nowadays only about half that amount goes through Thailand, the other half being channeled through China.

In 1990, the Chinese government revealed that 1.45 tons of heroin were seized in Yunnan—more than five times the total in 1989. Last year, the official *China Daily* newspaper owned up to 250,000 registered addicts in China—a no doubt conservative figure. The purported scale of drug trafficking inside China moreover suggests, at least to some narcotics experts, official complicity at high levels.

Paradoxically, this trend is at odds with the severity of some provincial administrations in meting out punishment for drug-related crimes. In border towns, signs and posters outside police stations and health clinics give graphic warning of the dangers of drug abuse and the horrors of AIDS, now on the rise in many Yunnanese towns. Drug traffickers are routinely executed in China after summary trials, their before-and-after pictures displayed on public posters.

Chinese influences obtaining on the Burma side of the border may not be as sensational, but they are nonetheless of concern to its other neighbors, India and Thailand, who have reason to wonder if it is moving along Burma's southern coast, where it has built military installations, into the Indian Ocean. Up north, just a few hours southwest of the Sino-Burmese border, the old capital of Mandalay is experiencing an economic boom thanks to an influx of Chinese goods brought in along the Burma Road to Lashio and thence to Mandalay. Chinese-owned houses, hotels and stores are on the rise, and Chinese engineers are improving the highway from Mandalay to Rangoon, and also building a railway line from Mandalay to Myitkyina, near the Chinese border. Chinese joint ventures include an international airport, irrigation dams, bridges, and satellite stations.

These and other activities point to a period of increasing cooperation between Burma and China, in which the Burma Road once again may become a major highway servicing, for better or worse, a multiplicity of shifting alliances and interests.

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THE BURMA ROAD

Procedure

In addition to the usual library work and computer searches, some of which will require researchers and translators, I anticipate extensive interviews in Burma, China, Japan, England, and parts of the United States.

In China, I would make one more trip down the Burma Road, this time with the help of the Lung family. Lung Yün, one of the great autocrats of the warlord era, was the provincial governor of Yunnan when the road was first built. His son Shing Lung lives in Hong Kong; his daughter, Mrs. Celia Lung, in Washington, DC. Both are friends of mine. They have strong family ties and influential friends in Kunming, where the Lung family mystique is still remembered if not felt.

The Lungs have kindly given me access to family contacts and archives in Yunnan Province and in the United States. In addition, they are eager to help me locate any Burma Road experts or survivors that might be worth interviewing—including members of my Yunnanese grandfather's clan.

Finally, Shing Lung has offered to arrange for me a trip to Burma to see the other Burma Road—under escort by one of the minority armies. Although the Burma Road is technically under the jurisdiction of the central military government, as a practical matter the region is controlled by minority groups whose leaders are friends of Shing Lung. Their cooperation would probably be more helpful than the military regime's in undertaking such a trip. I prefer to accept this offer only as a last resort, however, and believe it would be more prudent to go through official channels first by applying for a visa. This conventional route through Rangoon would enable me to revisit aspects of my family history long inaccessible to me. Of course, given my political history, the likelihood of my being allowed back to Burma is slim. Nonetheless, it is the route I must try before any other. Should I fail, however, I intend taking Shing Lung up on his offer.

It is also possible that I am unable to get into Burma by any means in the near future.

Other overseas travel would include England, where I plan to visit the libraries of the India Office, the Office of Public Records, and Cambridge

University's Needham Research Institute, for research on the colonial angle. While in England, I would also seek to track down relatives and acquaintances of my grandfather Eric Percy-Smith, who might shed more light on his Burmese days, and old colleagues and friends of my father for information on his political and journalistic careers.

I might also find it useful to travel to Japan, to interview veterans of the Burma campaigns—or any informed relatives of those no longer alive.

Finally, in the United States, I would conduct interviews not only with relatives, friends and other *Nation* sources for more family lore, but with Burma scholars, old Burma hands, Detachment 101 and Flying Tiger members, CBI Theater and Army Corps of Engineers veterans for more historical background. These interviews would take place in the course of trips to several different states: most likely California, New York, Massachusetts, parts of the mid-west, and of course Washington DC. With proper planning I hope to fit into my trips not only interviews but visits to libraries like Harvard's and Cornell's as well. In Washington, DC, I hope to continue my research at the Library of Congress and the Federal Records Center at the National Archives.

Although it would be premature to set out the contours of my book at this early date, I envision a highly personal and somewhat unconventional approach to my combination of history, memoir and oral history. The more detailed sections of this book proposal emphasizing the history of the Burma Road do not reflect their proportionate value in the final text. Ultimately, it is my family's story set, against the story of modern Burma, which will dominate.

Some models whose spirit I hope will inform the book are: V.S. Naipaul (*An Area of Darkness*); Colin Thubron (*Behind the Wall*); Luigi Barzini (*The Italians*); Ryszard Kapuscinski (*The Emperor* and *Soccer Wars*); Norman Lewis (*Golden Earth* and *Voices of the Old Sea*); Maurice Collis (*The Land of the Great Image*); Peter Matthieson (*The Snow Leopard*); and Jan Morris (*Destinations*).

I expect to complete this book within three years from the starting date.

THE BURMA ROAD
A Chinese Journey

Some journeys in remote lands require a key command. On the dog-sledding stretches of the Arctic it is *Mush! Mush!*; on the Burma Road, *Lao Lu! Lao Lu!* (*Old road! Old road!*)

Lao Lu! Lao Lu! we learned to yodel, whenever Hua, our good-natured driver, veered off the old road in favor of a new superhighway. He gave in with wistful glances in the direction of the newer, wider, faster superhighway. Then he would search his rearview mirror for some clues on our faces that might explain this strange fixation on an old road.

Prowling the road with me were my friends Bertil and Hseng NOUNG Lintner, both Burma Road devotees. I was doing a haphazard feasibility study for a book I had in mind; the Lintners were accompanying me to the Burmese border where they planned to report on the current intricacies of the Sino-Burmese border trade.

Bertil is a Swedish journalist and the author of several important books on Burma. His wife Hseng NOUNG, a former guerrilla in the Shan State Army, is a photographer. After planning our trip over a series of trans-Atlantic calls (the Lintners live in Bangkok), we met in Hong Kong on November 1, and flew to Kunming together.

The plan was to spend the night in Kunming, then set off the next day by plane to Mangshih, the nearest airstrip to the Burma border. From there: continue by bus to the frontier town of Ruili. At Ruili, the Lintners knew people who could help with arrangements to rent a chauffeured car in which we would drive back to Kunming along the Burma Road. We had a week to accomplish this.

No sooner had we settled into the Kunming Hotel when we had to rethink our plans. No tickets were available for any of the two daily flights to Mangshih the next day; nor for the day after, or the week after (or at any time, I began to suspect, in the imaginable future).

After twelve hours of information-gathering and hard bargaining we managed to find a chauffeured vehicle for rent, a change of plans that required driving to the border and flying back, and an element of risk (there was no guarantee of air tickets from the border back to Kunming).

People who complain about the impossibility of getting things done in Third World countries forget that actually everything is possible—provided you are willing to stuff yourself with unwanted meals, feign interest in trophies and family photos, engage in hours of punishing chitchat, and listen to long blow-hard monologues as a means to winning the needed favor. Then there is—in China as everywhere else—the kindness of strangers who go out of their way to help dotty foreigners attain their absurd goals.

A combination of the above paid off in our case, and by the next afternoon we were barreling along the new superhighway out of Kunming and past its exuberantly polluting factories and suburbs. Behind the wheel of our shiny white Peugeot was Hua, as tall and handsome and tolerant a driver as one could hope to find without placing a personals ad. A jaunty overnight bag, a glass bottle filled with big gray tea leaves soaking in gray water, and a pair of mobster sunglasses distinguished him as a veteran of long-distance driving. According to the middleman who had brought us together, Hua was also a professional motorcycle racer. For some reason, I found this reassuring. He showed other signs of professionalism, nodding in understanding when we warned him, before setting out, to be prepared to make sudden stops—for the toilet (*càsuò*) and for photo opportunities (*fóot-oh!*).

What he hadn't expected was the back-seat chorus for the Old Road.
Lao lu! Lao Lu!

A good half-hour passed on the big multi-lane highway out of Kunming before I caught my first glimpse of the Burma Road. So there it was—a little country lane about half a mile away, running parallel to the left and at a slight drop. Glare and haze consumed the earth for miles around, but the road looked liquid, the asphalt gleaming and coursing like a stream, dark and deep in the shade of big cypress trees. Over this peaceful current floated a truck here, a lorry there, some bicycles, and the eternal bullock cart.

Hseng Nung tapped Hua on the shoulder and pointed to the road.
"Lao lu?"

Hua nodded. "Lao lu."

"Lao lu! Lao lu," we clamored, pointing and gesticulating.

But Hua couldn't—or wouldn't—leave the highway at that point; and for several more miles the road remained unreachable and teased like a mirage, now streaming alongside us, now disappearing, now reappearing to the right, slowly sliding underneath and off diagonally to the left before disappearing once again. Hseng Nung and I, seated in the back-seat, were impatient to set foot on the road we'd come to survey. But up in the front seat, well cushioned with his book bag full of maps, Bertil took the long view. "There are 500 kilometers more of that road, after all."

At last the superhighway came to a T-juncture. Hua turned in his seat a little. "Lao lu," he announced, with a flourish of the hand that said, "The road is served."

All at once, as with the turning of a page or the parting of a curtain, appeared the long-awaited scene, entirely new but so familiar, so true to fantasy, that it took the breath away. "Smooth as a whetstone and straight as an arrow," reads a Chinese poem from the 9th century BC about the roads of the Chou Dynasty. Here was such a picture-perfect road: stone-smooth and arrow-straight in its cypress-flanked reach across an expanse of distant hills, deserted fields, and a lonely mud-brick farmhouse or two.

Then we were slowing down for the approach to our first town. Up ahead was a tableau of land-travel modes past and present—lorries, tractors, buses, buffalo carts, hand-drawn wagons, a six-seater horse carriage or two, a caravan of mules, and a stream of bicycles in the front baskets of which were produce of one sort and another: fruit, vegetables, and the occasional infant. Staking their claim on what was left of the road were the pedestrians: old men and women shuffling along inch by inch, younger men and women overburdened with enormous loads (the women with baskets on their backs, attached with thongs strapped across their foreheads). Small children played at the edges with a heart-stopping disregard for traffic, likewise herds of black goats, black pigs, and black buffalo (the barnyard animals of Yunnan all seem to be black).

"Foot-oh! foot-oh!" we cried, forcing Hua to stop in the thick of this fray so we could get our pictures.

Then it was open road, no longer arrow-straight now but meandering up mountain sides that overlooked the endlessly repetitive yet endlessly pleasing geometry of terraced paddy fields I recalled from childhood

journeys to the north of Burma. I remember thinking then that all mountain farmers had to be artists, for how else would their fields fall into such perfect arrangements when viewed from above?

But where the mountain villages of Southeast Asia are insubstantial affairs of bamboo and thatch—little playhouses fenced in only by palisades of more vine and leaf—the farmhouses here in China, made of mud brick and topped with curling eaves, seem to huddle behind forbidding walls.

But the same tradition that erected those walls also planted the beautiful cypress trees which lined our road mile after mile. An encomium written in the Ch'in dynasty of the second century BC, when China was first unified into a single country, praises Huang Ti, the "Yellow Emperor" for the condition of the empire's roads. "These highways were fifty paces wide and a tree was planted every 30 feet along them. The planting of the green pine trees was what gave beauty to the roads."

The tradition was still alive when Marco Polo traveled to China in the 13th century during the Mongol rule and found much to admire about the road system. ". . . the Great Khan has bidden that on the highroads along which his messengers, as well as merchants and other people travel, trees should be planted on both sides, at a distance of two paces from one another. And truly they are so high and big, that they can be seen from afar. The Great Khan has had this done so that people should be able to see the roads and not miss their way. . . they are of great comfort to traders and wayfarers."

On we drove, past increasingly formidable vistas of jungled mountain gorges—some seemingly perpendicular—cut by small sparkling rock-studded rivers, higher and higher in a serpentine course toward the highest peak in the road. This was Emperor's Temple Mountain, which is either 8,200 feet or 9,200 feet, depending on surveys of different eras.

Afterwards, descending from the high mountains of Dingshiling (roughly translatable as "After this mountain is conquered, controlling the west is chicken feed") we would—under more leisurely circumstances—have been looking forward to a worthwhile detour.

Ten miles off the road was the old city of Dali. Poised on the edge of Erhai lake with the 4,000-meter high Changshan mountain range as a backdrop, it was the center of operations between the 8th and 13th century

when Yunnan was part of the independent Nanzhao kingdom. It is still a center for minorities. Twenty-four different minority groups are registered in Yunnan, a tourist attraction touted in local guidebooks, but often with the same breezy disregard for detail with which the tourist bureaus list other wonders of the regions ("worldwide rare sceneries, monkeys, birds, cliffs, etc.").

But Dali was out of the way, by now it was dark, and we still had a distance to go before reaching Xiaguan, where we planned to spend the night. So we stayed on the road, stopping instead at Fengyi, a town memorable to me chiefly for its roadside restaurant. There, in one gluttonous instant, I abandoned all precaution and dove into a most unsanitary but scrumptious meal of bean curd soup, fried mustard greens, dried beef, and deep fried larvae.

Stuffed—and still exhausted from the long drive—we pushed on toward Xiaguan in a stupor. Xiaguan is a small sleepless town on account of being a major transpiration center for the region. Important things happened here determining the progress and fate of the Burma Road during the war years, when the Highway Administration moved its headquarters from Kunming. Now it is mostly a place to make bus connections or—as in our case—to break journey between Kunming and the border. Despite the late hour, the hotel parking lot where we pulled in for the night was still filling up with vans, buses and the infrequent private sedan like ours.

Early the next morning, while waiting in the dim lobby for my companions to appear, I watched an overnight bus pull up in front of the hotel and realized what is meant by a "sleeper" bus in China. The sleeping compartment is none other than the luggage rack. I gave silent thanks for having been spared the bus experience.

It wasn't just the idea of spending the night in a luggage compartment. A friend of mine, an American army officer familiar with the Burma Road, had given me advice in the event I was forced to take a bus: "Take along a Mark Cross pen. Upon boarding, show the pen to the driver and tell him you will give it to him if he gets you to your destination alive. Once on the bus, always sit in the middle, in one of the aisle seats, during the day. After dark, sit on the outside. This is because during the day, you are more likely to be sideswiped by an oncoming bus, whereas at night you are more likely to be

pierced through the middle of the bus by logs from an oncoming timber truck. If the driver starts acting as if the bus has only two speeds—i.e., driving at 115 miles per hour, then coasting downhill till the bus slows to a stop—kill him. If the bus turns over, do not give him the Mark Cross pen.”

The allusion to timber trucks was not entirely fanciful. All day long we had passed truck after truck carrying great symmetrical logs from the dwindling teak forests of Burma. Pouring into China at a rate that has often reached 200 trucks a day, the teak makes its way eventually into Chinese bazaars, in the form of carved elephants and water buffalo as ugly as it is possible to produce without deliberately trying.

It was still dark when we set out from Xiaguan at 7 in the morning, for our final day on the road to the border. China has only one time zone throughout the country, so although it was seven in the morning by official time, local daylight saving time would have put it more at 5 a.m. where we were in the west. At the border areas, both time zones are observed, with people taking care, when they set appointments, which time they mean—Burmese or Chinese.

Meeting daylight by degrees as we climbed the hairpin bends into more jungled mountains, I found my fear had dissipated some. I closed my eyes less often as we rounded a curve overlooking an immense drop-off; and the near-misses with oncoming buses or trucks, the brushes with death, did not seem unnerving to the same degree. I wasn't gripping the door handle with such white-knuckled force, either.

I gave myself over to the rhythm and music of Hua's driving—the way he seemed to speed up to take sharp turns, the one-note concerto of his ebullient horn, the one-cassette repertoire of Chinese muzak playing non-stop. The prospect of death by dangerous driving is not nearly as bleak when one is in the hands of such a likable chauffeur. It wasn't just caution that dictated the use of his horn; it was pure mischief. He especially enjoyed giving drunks along the road the fright of their lives with a double-barreled blast from his horn, and couldn't resist scaring an elderly worthy or two. Here was a lucky man: one who knew how to squeeze out of drudgery a bit of fun. Overall, he struck me as an excellent driver. Just to make sure, I leaned forward to ask Bertil.

"We found ourselves an excellent driver, don't you think, Bertil?"

"Yes."

"So you think he drives well?"

"Oh, yes. Quite well."

"Do you think though—I don't know, just asking—that he takes the corners a trifle too fast?"

"Yes, he does." The years in Asia had evidently given Bertil an Asiatic lack of concern for contradiction. "And when you speed around the bends like that it's easy to lose control and go off the edge. I've seen it happen."

Oh why had I not brought along a Mark Cross pen?

I looked at Hseng Nong. She was gazing out the window in a serene trance; but Hseng Nong was not normal, either. Otherwise exemplary traveling companions, the Linters, I found, were no help to the fainthearted.

When he was in his twenties, Bertil had packed his rucksack and set off from his small hometown in Sweden one day for a walk to Vienna. Ten years later, having hitchhiked across much of the continent, he proceeded to Asia. It was in the jungles of Burma's Shan State that he met and married Hseng Nong.

One particular story characterizes their romance. Hseng Nong at the time was a cipher clerk in one of the Shan rebel armies, which she had joined some seven years ago at the age of 16. The Shans were among the many minorities caught in Burma's long-lasting civil war, which Bertil at the time was covering from his base in Bangkok. One night, while on assignment at Hseng Nong's camp, he was awakened by the sound of automatic rifle fire. He jumped in alarm. "What the hell is that?" From nearby in the dark came Hseng Nong's gentle voice. "I think it's an M-16."

The two were married in the jungle in a guerrilla ceremony, and proceeded to plan an equally unorthodox honeymoon. They set out on a trek together that took them from Calcutta, across Burma's rebel-held northern territory, where no foreigner had been allowed in decades, and finally into China—where they were promptly deported to Sweden. The Linters had made it through that no-man's-land with the help of soldiers from various ethnic minority armies (some of whom were killed along the way)—by means of foot, bicycle, jeep, mule, and elephant. In the course of this odyssey, Hseng

Noung had managed not only to become a superb photographer; during a tense period of hiding in the jungle, she also gave birth to their daughter.

With this background, it wasn't entirely surprising that Hseng Noung would be unconcerned about things like toppling over the edge of a 6,000 foot precipice—or getting on the wrong side of border guards.

We had just come down into a valley where the Mekong river was spanned by two bridges, one old, one new. On the other side of the bridges was the standard checkpoint found throughout China, at demarcation lines between prefectures and at bridges. The stop would have lasted only as long as a routine check; except that Hseng Noung decided to stretch her legs—and take some quick shots of the bridges at the same time. Not quick enough to escape the guards, however. Chinese border guards are personally offended by anyone trying to photograph a bridge or a railway station. They demanded her camera. Pretending not to understand, she returned to her seat in the car, folded her hands over her seasoned Canon, and sat. The guards continued to scold and demand, shouting what must have been the equivalent of "Give us the camera or you'll be sorry!"

"What, this camera?" said Hseng Noung, chuckling at such an outlandish request. "Oh, no. I can't give *this* camera to you."

When it was no longer possible for a sentient being to misunderstand the thrust of their accusations Hseng Noung appeared to catch on at last that they involved the bridge. Oh, *that!* She got out of the car, steered one of the female guards toward a group of vendors selling bananas on the road, at the foot of the bridge, and urged her to look through the camera lens to see with her own eyes that it was only the colorful bananas she was trying to capture, not some rusty old bridge.

The argument was finally settled when Bertil, who had been sitting silently in the front seat, suddenly unfolded his six-foot three-inch frame when he got out of the car. "Now what exactly," he said, bristling as only an affronted Swede can, "is the problem?"

The next minute we drove off unscathed, the offending camera still on Hseng Noung's lap.

Having grown up in a police state I had a healthy fear of checkpoints and border guards, but except for those officious bridge protectors none of the Chinese security officials met along the way seemed especially

conscientious or menacing. Maybe it was just difficult to feel too threatened after seeing, at another checkpoint, one dour-looking official wearing delicate white lace ankle socks under his military brogues.

For anyone with a memory of Red Guard excesses, it is impossible to see Chinese youths in uniform and not feel an instinctive fear. On one stretch of the road in the Shweli valley, near a point where the road overlaps the Burmese border, it was disquieting to approach first a tractor, then an open truck, each overloaded with teenagers all standing and waving and shouting slogans behind a flag, as though on their way to a rally. But when we stopped to photograph them, it turned out that it was only a kind of community outing—a group on its way to a temple festival.

No, the old stereotype of public security personnel was no more. At Kunming airport, while standing in the passport inspection line, I noticed one uniformed airport official who must have been charged with conveying insouciance and whimsy. Pirouetting through the orderly lines, laughing gaily as in a parody of some old propaganda play, he snatched papers out of random hands, to expedite the clearance of those lucky ones.

But there were no laughing guards among the busybodies who confiscated Hua's passport at another checkpoint. Because he felt awkward about asking us to pay the fee (or fine?) imposed at the time, it wasn't till later that we were informed of the loss. Fearing that this equaled the loss of identity papers so essential to a person's safety in some totalitarian countries, we questioned him at length through an interpreter about the consequences. But although he shook his fist at the memory of those bureaucratic martinets in the guard booth, it appeared that the passport was duplicable back in Kunming and the whole thing was a matter of annoyance, not fear (as it would have been in recent times past).

Grave as the passport incident seemed, it paled by comparison, I thought, to the *œsuo* (toilet) incident of the previous day.

Hua had braked obediently, letting us out onto a photo-friendly site featuring a double hairpin turn on the road above us, and a 6,000-foot drop to the Mekong river valley below. I had gotten the shots I wanted; Hseng NOUNG had switched to her video camera and was aiming it at the few trucks chugging up the scenic bend; Bertil and Hua were sharing a chew of tobacco

by the side of the car. . .and I decided it was the time and place to relieve myself.

Any guidebook on the Burma Road would have to mention in good conscience that such strategic spots are rare. On one side of the road inevitably is a wall of rock; on the other, a sheer drop of several thousand feet. I was standing in just such a spot. But wait. Beyond the edge of the road the ground sloped off into a sort of shelf, an outcropping with a bit of shrubbery, before falling off to the valley in the sickening distance below. If I slid down on my seat to the ledge, I could nestle in the shrubs for a quick *cèsuð*.

I slid—only to discover that the outcropping I took to be a shrubbery-covered shelf was all shrubbery, no shelf. Clutching at the roots of insubstantial plants, I found myself dangling feet down over an incline previously encountered only in the land of nightmare. Between me and certain death were a few shrubs; between me and panic, embarrassment. Pulling at branches and simultaneously pushing myself backwards uphill, I returned to the edge of the road in a sitting position.

"Oh there you are," said Bertil, yawning. "I thought you'd fallen off the side somewhere."

"My God! I almost went down. Can you imagine? I almost fell off the mountain."

"Oh, I've fallen off a mountain," he said, as though I shouldn't be giving myself any airs on that score.

"What?! You actually fell off a mountain? How? Where?"

"In the Philippines." Apparently, any fool knew it was in the Philippines that people routinely fell off mountains.

"But how?"

"Well, I was walking along a path. It was at the edge of a mountain. I slipped. I fell."

"Then what?"

"Then I rolled down till I stopped," said Bertil, a little impatient at pursuing so dull a topic.

"But how did you survive?"

"People came. They saved me."

From then on I tried not to ask too many questions whose answers might be self-evident. Still, I couldn't always refrain. At Ruili, the border town and half-way point on our journey, I set out one morning with the Lintners on what seemed like a fool's errand: to make contact with some Burmese revolutionaries who had no idea to expect us. I wondered out loud how this meeting would come about, given the lack of prior notice. "Well, I go and sit in the Burmese coffee shop under the banyan tree until someone recognizes me," said Bertil. Of course.

Sure enough, sipping sweet condensed-milk coffee under the banyan tree, we had less than a five-minute wait before Bertil was approached by one of his revolutionary friends. Steaming bowls of complimentary rice noodles appeared on our table. These we devoured in short order, with sugared pancakes and more sweet coffee for chasers. The friend pulled up a stool next to us and sat long enough to give discreet instructions on where to meet after breakfast for a private chat.

Around us swarmed the hoi polloi of a frontier town: gem dealers, fabric merchants, beggars, prostitutes, money changers, book sellers, and food vendors. But suddenly we were in Burma, not China—surrounded by Burmese signs and banners, Burmese foods, and Burmese speakers wearing Burmese sarongs. Here were the denizens of frontier trade, shuttling back and forth with impunity across the borders of two xenophobic nations not usually open to such easy travel. But Ruili was a free-trade zone where passports were not required and trade was lively. I spoke to a beggar, a shy twelve-year old girl, who told me that she had walked with her mother and grandmother all the way from Lashio (the terminus of the Burma Road), a distance of some 116 miles, to seek better opportunities in Ruili. To such impoverished refugees, Ruili must seem like a Xanadu of variety and plenty.

Throughout our own drive along the road, every time I was drawn to some delicacy or novelty, the Lintners assured me that I could find the same, and better, in Ruili. It became a running joke that every wish could be fulfilled, every appetite satisfied in Ruili—until we found ourselves chanting in unison, over desiderata of any sort, "You can get that in Ruili!"

Arriving that first night at this tinsel town, I discovered the promise to be very nearly true. Up and down the main street neon signs flashed and theater-light bulbs burned brightly, while pedestrians strolled, mopeds

sputtered, bicycles rang and vans tooted their horns with irresponsible abandon. And yes, one could find almost anything in Ruili. A beauty parlor conveniently open at 10:30 p.m. (possibly because it doubled as a whorehouse). Karaoke stands all along the street. Direct-dial access to the United States from our hotel. A marketplace filled to the rafters with non-durable goods of the tackiest sort. "Hot-pot" food stalls where you took your pick from a choice of twenty or so steaming pots of food and sat on a rickety stool to enjoy the most mouthwatering meal for a grand total of a dollar or two. Rice cakes such as I hadn't tasted in thirty-odd years: cooked over a charcoal fire until they puff up, then sprinkled with brown sugar and served piping hot on a banana leaf. For those who like to read while they eat, there is even a public notice board right next to the rice-cake seller. There you can read the latest news while blowing on your hot cake—although the illustrated bulletins of public executions could cause a temporary loss of appetite.

Finally there are the revolutionaries and refugees without whom no Oriental border town is complete. And the Lintners seemed to know all of them—Burmese, Chinese, Shans, Kachins, Wa, and representatives of other nationalities and minorities—together pursuing a bewildering assortment of interests, enemies and dreams.

A few days later, having caught up on the underground gossip and news about local murders and executions, the drug traffic, the illegal immigrant industry (the smuggling of Chinese workers bound for Japan and the United States) the black-market in new automobiles, and other current border issues, the Lintners were ready to leave. And after several nights in a hotel room directly above a coal burning factory, so was I. I wanted to do as advised by the placard in the lobby: LEAVE WITH VALUABLE BODY.

Soon after our arrival in Ruili we had reached the unanimous decision to return to Kunming not by air (even if tickets were available) but by car. Luckily, Hua had come prepared to wait and drive us back if necessary. By now Hua was both our guardian angel and the devil we knew, decidedly preferable to an unknown CAAC pilot. The reputation of Chinese drivers is exceeded only by the reputation of Chinese pilots, so we opted for ground travel in the hands of our slightly daredevil but indefatigable Hua.

But before returning home, one last detour was in order—to Wanding, the last Chinese town on the Burma Road. Ruili itself was not on the Road; we had gone there only for the glamour, and the flavor of Burma, more pervasive there than anywhere along the road. Wanding was technically *the* border town on our route. It was also the future Las Vegas of the frontier, to judge from a glossy trade brochure we had picked up in Kunming. "Wanding now becomes the hot point of global investment," said the optimistic text.

"As a neighbor of Myanmar (Burma), Wanding is far away from the urban noise, full of quiet and noble sentiment in a relatively free humanist environment and surrounded by the vigorous personality of minority nationalities." However, the article noted in a frank aside, "there is a serious shortage of entertainment facilities." To correct this, "employment of Russian, Thai and Myanmar girls for services shall create mysterious and exotic atmosphere as well as irresistible attraction." Then, perhaps anticipating lapses in scheduling, "in theatre, nationality song and dance will be performed regularly or irregularly."

The real Wanding resembled a hot point of global investment only in its cluster of money changers working the front of a bank. It seemed an improbable site for irresistible attractions, regular or irregular. The only excitement I personally witnessed in that town was a tractor attempting to back into a narrow corner of the market, itself a poor imitation of the Ruili bazaar. We had been spoiled by the bright lights of Ruili.

Expecting to retrace the very road by which we had come, I envisioned the drive back as predictable and therefore dull. As it turned out, Hua had taken a detour on the way up which bypassed the most dramatic series of hairpin bends overlooking the Salween. This spectacular route, now made almost obsolete by a newer, straighter road across the hills, was worth the sum of hardships and hazards suffered by an acrophobe like me. Every turn in the road was a flourish, a feat, that invited gasps of wonder and deserved applause. Laying bare in its path an extravaganza of jungled mountains, cloud-wrapped peaks, river gorges, minuscule villages and exquisitely tiered fields, the road swooped and looped through the red hill region of the Salween. The Chinese name for Salween is *Juchiang* ("Angry River") and legend has it the roar of the river resembles the snarling of some provoked beast, while the power of its enchantment is such that

anyone standing at the edge of a ravine is seized by an uncontrollable urge to leap.

My own fear was not of leaping but falling as the road narrowed, making the problem of oncoming traffic more ticklish with each precipitous turn. The tension, the fatigue, and the warm sun finally put me to sleep. . . until Bertil woke me to exclaim that I had just missed the single most frightening moment of the entire journey. He had looked down on his side and seen nothing, not a piece of the road—only a sheer drop to the Salween, as small as a needle below.

By the time we reached Baoshan for our last overnight stop we were all muttering to ourselves, "Just one more day of this. . ."

Baoshan is an old city and the second largest on the road. Traces of the old Yunnanese architecture of wooden houses still remain, and unlike other cities in this part of China, it was laid out like an imperial city with streets running straight north and south, east and west. During the war the city was the scene of such crowding and chaos that one could hardly walk through the streets. Cholera broke out as corpses were left in the streets and night-soil carriers abandoned their loads to run from the bombs (there was no air-raid warning signal); and the tide of refugees carried the epidemic along. We had hoped to see more of the city by day, but there was time only for dinner at a Szechwan-style hole-in-the-wall of exceptional filth but superior cuisine—before turning in for the night.

Our last day on the road began on a mournful note. At a village outside Baoshan, we came upon a gawking crowd absorbed in the spectacle of an old man wailing and beating his breast over the body of a small child. I had a fleeting glimpse of a tiny human form laid out on a bamboo pallet. On the other side of the road was a stalled tractor which might possibly have caused the accident. Hua indicated that accidents of this sort were frequent, which didn't surprise me after the many small children I noticed playing or walking unaccompanied along busy stretches of the road.

What a road this was: never was a highway so uncrossed by other paths, so unimpeded by intersections. Not only was it the major thoroughfare of a vast region, it was the one and only road servicing an expanse of mountain and valley, river and stream, city and village. No other

roads reared their inferior heads, as least not as far as the eye could see from the great Road itself.

No wonder we had passed, here and there, at improbably remote spots, solitary figures drinking in the wonders of the road, as in lonely landscape paintings. A man with a bundle of faggots contemplating the distant mountains. A small boy mesmerized by the bright red of a bare cliff. A child fast asleep by the side of the road, alone in the middle of nowhere. A young man reading a book on a ledge overlooking a valley as wide and blue-green as the sea. A young mother with her baby on her back, tending her cow and pigs where the road reached a summit of deserted alpine pastures. . .

Back in the thirties, when my father was still a young man and a transportation official, he had come to China to see this road, newly built at the time and not quite complete. In the half century or so since then, precious few changes had occurred along the road that would surprise him today, were he still alive to see them. The universe visible from the road was basically unchanged: the same jungles covering the same peaks; the same rivers spanned by the same bridges, the same streams irrigating the same terraced fields; the same picturesque groups of this or that minority in the same tribal clothing worn since centuries past, the same variety of mules used in caravans of old. The motor traffic itself had thinned somewhat, of course, since the heavy volume of the war years. And where Chevrolet had dominated, *Dong Feng* buses were now the lorry of choice. Too, satellite dishes sprouted over a village here, a temple there. And at stretches of the road under repair, we did come upon the odd tractor or bulldozer-machinery that wasn't available for the building of the road. But in the main, the laborers we saw were still using the same methods of building and upgrading as they had back then, chipping away at rock, moving the earth handful by handful.

As we maneuvered the last of the hills on our approach to Kunming by night, the city's layered lights flickering below like illuminated terraces in a jungle of dark, I felt a pilgrim's sense of return from a place of homage. I had traveled the length of a road taken before me by my father, before him by his father, and before that by his father's father—on through a past forever lost to memory and family history.

Later that night, back in Kunming, I was struck by the many paths taken by people from my own past which intersected on the road. Exhausted, car-sore and covered from hair to shoe with dust, we arrived at the Kunming Hotel to find more Burmese revolutionaries. News of the Lintners' arrival had spread, bringing the welcomers—among them old friends from their trekking days in the Burmese jungle. One of these aging guerrillas, a small frail man, was out on a pass from the hospital, where he was being treated for a debilitating malady. Another old veteran, seemingly sturdy but evidently not, had been seized with an attack of dizziness and almost passed out at a bus station earlier that day on his way to the hotel. While I was the outsider, the uninvited guest, I was greeted warmly by these retired rebels, most of whom had either met or knew of my father. They were fellow-patriots and comrades of sorts: He had fought his own wars as editor and publisher of *The Nation* in the capital city of Rangoon, while they fought theirs in the jungles of the north.

Plans had been laid for a dinner in our honor, to be held at the home of a Chinese friend. Discussions about time, transportation, and directions ensued—all complicated by our discovery that the Kunming Hotel was full. We had paid Hua by then and said fond good-byes; but, devoted to the last, he offered to drive us to another hotel to try our luck. Several fully occupied hotels later, he returned us, exhausted and defeated, to the Kunming. There we threw ourselves on the mercy of the management and ended up with a suite which the Lintners and I by then were only too happy to share.

Trudging up to our room to deposit our dusty bags, two ailing jungle veterans in tow, we stopped only for a quick wash-up before setting out for the dinner in our honor. In the confinement of a small apartment in the suburbs of Kunming, our hosts had prepared an elaborate multi-course meal which we were too tired to eat. Still, the evening might have dragged on, had one of the old men not been laid low by another attack of dizziness. His stout, amiable wife, younger than him by more than a few years, promptly abandoned the kitchen (where she had stood cooking for the duration of our long meal) to minister to him. Settling him in an armchair, repeating a soothing reminder that she knew what to do, she knew exactly what to do, she proceeded to rub Tiger Balm into various pressure points on his hands and face with her formidable thumb.

what to do, she proceeded to rub Tiger Balm into various pressure points on his hands and face with her formidable thumb.

Leaving the patient to rest, we took our leave round about midnight and groped our way step by step down darkened flights of stairs. On my arm was the other old veteran who had begun to tremble more and more as the night wore on. I feared he would never make it down the stairs unsupported; but somehow we got him to the hospital and returned him to his ward in time.

It must have been then, on the cab back to the hotel, that I dropped my wallet—cash, credit cards, driver's license and all.

And so, at two o'clock in the morning, following a twelve-hour drive, an hour-long hotel check-in, and a three-hour dinner in the company of feeble old freedom fighters, I found myself on another surreal chase. My companions this time were three assistant-managers of the Kunming Hotel who ended up gallantly accompanying me to file a report at the police station. The chances of recovery were clearly slight, but in that twilight zone of mental instability I was determined not to miss my chance of a lifetime to see the inside of a Yunnanese police station.

The next morning, when I recounted these travails to the Lintners (who had slept through my comings and goings like babies), Bertil pointed out that it was entirely within the realm of possibility to recover the wallet. This was China, after all, a country with a fetish about honesty. "I knew a fellow who lost his camera in China," he said. "Granted this was a few years ago. He reported it to the police, who found it the next day. The only thing was: the police returned it to him with an invitation to witness the execution of the thief."

I began to pray for non-recovery. Anyway, the wallet and its contents were a reasonable price to pay for the journey I'd survived—more expensive than a Mark Cross pen, it's true, but not too dear for life and limb.

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